



Creating Inclusive Environments and Learning Experiences for Infants and Toddlers

A sense of belonging is essential to inclusion. Just sharing physical space is not enough; when we work to create meaningful relationships and experiences to fully include infants and toddlers with disabilities, the child, the other children, and the family all benefit. Creating a truly inclusive environment means not only making appropriate adaptations to the physical space and materials but also fostering the social and emotional environment.

What Does Inclusion Look Like and What Can Caregivers Do to Support It?

When individual children need help to explore the environment, teachers can make modifications to support their participation. You probably already make changes for children on a regular basis, such as removing unstable objects when an infant is pulling up and learning to stand, or sitting quietly every morning with a toddler who has a particularly hard time saying goodbye to a parent. Individual adaptations for a child's disability or other special need are often similar to these examples.

Communicating with others can help you decide what adaptations are best for a child. For example, talk with a parent or an early intervention specialist, if there is one who works with the child's family, or other colleagues.

High-quality infant and toddler environments support exploration and development for children with a range of energy levels, skills, interests, and abilities. Beginning with a foundation that incorporates elements of universal design for learning (UDL) ensures that learning environments are designed to promote access, participation, and support for *all* infants and toddlers.

UDL is a framework for intentionally creating environments that are accessible to children with a variety of abilities and ways of exploring and learning. The idea of universal design was originally applied to the field of architecture to ensure that buildings and public spaces were consciously designed to be accessible to people with a variety of abilities. Some examples include automatic doors, sound cues in

A Video Example: Inclusion and Natural Environment

[FOOD THERAPIST](#)

<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/infant-toddler-resource-guide/supporting-videos>

In this video clip, a toddler eats lunch with his peers and food therapist.

Reflective questions: Here are some questions related to the video clip and the value of intervention services in the natural environment.

- In what ways does the food therapist encourage Trevor to experience the foods?
- How did Trevor and the other children respond to and potentially benefit from this experience?
- Can you think of other examples of intervention in the natural environment, such as a toddler receiving a breathing treatment, or an infant having a heart monitor while sleeping? (Note: In some cases, the child care provider learns how to provide the intervention services and in others, professional interventionists come to the program, as in the video.)
- Does this video remind you of experiences you've had with children in your care or in your program? If so, what are these experiences and how are they similar?

Please note that all programs filmed in this project are in full compliance with licensing regulations at the time of filming. In each video, the required adult-to-child ratio is met and all children are supervised, even if other adults are not visible on the screen.



elevators (announcing the floor number) and at crosswalks (announcing that it is safe to cross the street), curb cuts at intersections, wheelchair ramps, and handrails. Although the original intention was to ensure access for people with disabilities, many other people find these accessibility features useful in their daily lives (Conn-Powers, Frazier Cross, Krider Traub, & Hutter-Pishgahi, 2006).

In the field of early care and education, the concept of universal design for learning has been expanded to include curriculum design (teaching methods and learning goals), relationships, physical arrangement of the environment, and learning materials (Cunconan-Lahr & Stifel, 2013). Applying UDL principles in these ways ensures that each child has equal opportunities to meaningfully engage in all aspects of the child care setting. As a result, *all* children can experience inclusion and belonging. Inclusive care benefits typically developing children and their families as well. Reflect for a moment on how universal designs have been useful to you in your personal life or in the context of caring for children.

How Could You Make Adaptions to Materials to Meet the Needs of an Infant or Toddler in Your Care?

A child with a disability is a child first; the child's disability, diagnosis, or label is secondary, and does not define who the child is or what his or her potential may be.

A way to recognize this, is to use language that puts the child first, such as "a child with special needs" rather than "a special-needs child."

Choosing toys and materials carefully is important, because the right toys and materials can give children with disabilities a chance to be engaged and to experience success. For infants and toddlers, child care providers typically offer a variety of toys, such as blocks, stacking or nesting cups, and simple shape sorters or puzzles designed for very young children to use. Also, including materials that encourage sensory exploration by using smells, sounds, sights, and textures enhances children's learning and development.

Depending on the individual needs of a child, some toys or materials might require simple adaptations to support the child's ability to use them. For example, attaching hook-and-loop fasteners (Velcro), large knobs, or handles may make it easier for a child with visual or physical-motor special needs to play with blocks or puzzles. Similarly, adding fabric or tabs to the edges of cardboard book pages can make it easier to turn pages. Of course, it's important to be mindful of potential choking hazards when considering modifying materials.

These are just a few simple and inexpensive strategies to ensure that *all* children can use materials successfully. Fortunately, family members and specialists who are familiar with an individual child's development are also a great source of information and ideas for making simple adaptations to support the child's success. Many toys and materials for infants and toddlers already have some of the simple adaptations mentioned above.

Assistive technology can support a child's ability to participate actively in his or her home, childcare program, school, or other community settings. Using electronic toys, switches, or other devices in your child care environment may help an infant or toddler to take part fully in activities. Switches allow children who have limited hand function or muscle control to operate toys or materials that they could not play with otherwise. Sometimes a very young child will need equipment for positioning, such as a specialized chair or stander. Assistive technology and adaptations should be listed in the Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) if a child has one.

Thinking about how a child with special needs will explore and use your child care environment gives you a chance to consider the strengths of your environment and enhance it as needed.

How Is My Program Doing? What Might We Improve?

To help answer these questions, you may want to complete a self-assessment of inclusive practices in your program using a checklist such as one listed here:



- ◆ [Checklists for Providing/Receiving Early Intervention Supports in Child Care Settings](#): Use these checklists to assess your practices to promote learning and development. Provided by the Family, Infant and Preschool Program Center for the Advanced Study of Excellence in Early Childhood and Family Support Practices; part of the J. Iverson Riddle Developmental Center.
- ◆ [Inclusion Planning Checklist: Center-Based Early Care and Education Programs](#): Review this checklist for suggested ways to create responsive and effective inclusive environments in child care centers. Provided by SpecialQuest Birth–Five: Head Start/Hilton Foundation Training Program.
- ◆ [Using the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework in Your Program: Digital Markers of Progress](#): Track your program’s progress in promoting effective family engagement to support positive outcomes for families and children’s development and learning with this tool based on the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework and Performance Standards.

Adapting Your Environment for Infants and Toddlers with Special Needs

Resources included here provide information and strategies for selecting and adapting toys, everyday approaches to assistive technology, and checklists for improving access to developmentally appropriate learning experiences for all children:

- ◆ [Adapting the Child Care Environment for Children with Special Needs](#): Explore this resource from the eXtension Alliance for Better Child Care on environmental adaptations to include children with special needs.
- ◆ [Assistive Technology for Infants, Toddlers, and Young Children with Disabilities](#): Learn about how assistive technology can support social, motor, and communication skills, as well as attention span, self-confidence, and independence of infants and toddlers. This resource comes from the Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers.
- ◆ [Steps for Adapting Materials for Use by All Children](#): This chart by Kirsten Haugen shows modes for adapting toys based on materials from the “Let’s Play” Project at the University of Buffalo.

Questions to Consider for Supporting an Effective Responsive Program Environment

- ◆ How do I create environments that are welcoming to *all* children and their families?
- ◆ How do I promote access, participation, and a sense of belonging in daily learning experiences?
- ◆ How do I focus on learning about each infant and toddler as an individual, including his or her strengths, challenges, and interests?
- ◆ How are individual children’s strengths and interests reflected in daily routines, materials for exploration, and learning experiences?

References

- Conn-Powers, M., Frazier Cross, A., Krider Traub, E., & Hutter-Pishgahi, L. (2006). The universal design of early education: Moving forward for all children. *Beyond the Journal: Young Children on the Web*. Retrieved from https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/styles/iidc/defiles/ECC/ECC_Universal_Design_Early_Education.pdf
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